

Mike Schaffer: Saving Stonebraker Ranch & Flying the Backcountry
By Rebecca Wallick

Most life-long pilots will tell a similar story when asked how they first became interested in aviation: it always begins with watching airplanes fly overhead as a kid. Mike Schaffer of Meadows Valley is no different. He grew up in San Diego, watching Pacific Southwest Airlines 727's – the ones with a smile painted on them, under the nose – land and take off at nearby Lindberg Field.

At age nineteen, Mike started flying lessons in a Cessna 150 and soloed after about ten hours of instruction. Hungry for more flight time and to earn a commercial license, he moved to Nampa in 1976 where he acquired hours working as a flight instructor. Mike also worked as a fireman and EMT for the Nampa Fire Department. In 1980 he moved to Anchorage, Alaska for a flying job, unable to find one in the lower forty-eight. Flying light twin-engine aircraft for a charter company – Alaska Air Service – Mike transported mail, military personnel and supplies to DEW (Distant Early Warning) Line radar stations along the North Coast and Aleutian Islands of Alaska for two years. Moving to Alaska Aeronautical Industries in 1981, Mike flew twin-engine Otters on scheduled charter service between places such as Kodiak, Homer, Kenai, Denali and Valdez. In September 1983, he accepted a position with American West in Phoenix. “I was sorry to leave Alaska, but it was about the job,” Mike explains. He stayed with American West for 17 years, retiring the summer of 2001.

While Mike was living and working in Nampa, he bought a Cessna 180. Taking his father and brother for a flight, Mike made his first flight into the Idaho backcountry, landing at Chamberlain Basin. The area cast a spell over him, one that now inspires Mike to work to preserve a neighboring backcountry property with airstrip: Stonebraker Ranch.

Mike has another early Idaho connection. While working in Alaska, he met Sue Todd who was born and raised in Idaho. In 1994 they bought property in Circle C Ranches at the north end of Meadows Valley, off Smokey Boulder Road where they build a home while also maintaining a home in Arizona.

Exploring the Idaho Backcountry by Airplane

In 2013, Mike purchased an American Champion Scout, a two-seat, high-wing, single-engine fixed gear airplane perfect for flying into Idaho's backcountry. The airplane has a 180 HP engine and weighs 1450 lbs empty – less than Dot, the Schaffer's 34 year old draft horse. Acquiring the Scout, Mike's interest in the backcountry and its remote airstrips was rekindled.

Flying into the backcountry requires skill. “It's typical to get help from an instructor,” says Mike. “My friend Dan Coury invited me to follow him into the backcountry and I spent hours visiting with long-time pilots. With my airline safety training—a more conservative and conscientious way to fly based on airline pilot training—I just applied that to something smaller. It doesn't matter if it's one passenger or 200, safety is the same.”

Mike's interest in Stonebraker Ranch was first piqued by the book, *Bound for the Backcountry – A History of Idaho's Remote Airstrips* by Richard H. Holms, Jr. (2013, Cold Mountain Press). He heard from other pilots that the area was a gem, one of the most special backcountry strips, and that Idaho Fish and Game currently owned it. There was no public information specifically disallowing private aircraft to land there. Curious, Mike started flying into Chamberlain Basin and walking the trail up to Stonebraker.

Mike discovered that the main cabins were in good shape, but the original barn was not; the roof was nearly gone, the foundation leaning precariously. As late as 2007 Fish & Game had interns stayed at the ranch in the summertime, and a caretaker lived there until 2003. Mike wondered why such an historic backcountry homestead with a landing strip wasn't being made available to the general public and wasn't being better preserved. "It's such a precious place, and easily accessed by airplane," he explains, "even if one flies into Chamberlain and walks over, just a 1.5 mile hike to the north. The ranch is in reasonable condition, except for the barn." He started asking more questions, thinking something should be done before the old barn collapses.

A Journey into the Halls of Government

Mike's interest in Stonebraker took him to the Idaho governor's office. On his initial visit, he managed to meet with Stephen Goodson, Governor Otter's Special Assistant for Energy and Natural Resources. "I explained my passion to have Stonebraker available to the public, and have the public help preserve it." Goodson listened and was receptive to Mike's ideas, giving him referrals to people within Fish & Game. Because Goodson alerted those contacts at Fish & Game, they too were receptive. Eventually, Mike obtained the approval of Virgil Moore, Director of Fish & Game, for the department to commit to work with Idaho Heritage Trust regarding the possible restoration of the barn, and to consider allowing the public to use the airstrip again. Fish & Game is open to the ideas of preservation and access, but is waiting for the report from Idaho Heritage Trust before making a commitment. Mike notes that government funding for maintenance is an issue and advocates for volunteers and public involvement to bridge any gaps.

In June of 2017, a group including a politician, key preservation experts and Mike went to view and assess the options for preserving Stonebraker. In his Scout, Mike flew Paul Shepherd, a state representative from Idaho County (Stonebraker is situated in Idaho County) into Stonebraker, while a charter flight brought Katherine Kirk, Executive Director of Idaho Heritage Trust, an architect and an engineer to the ranch. Mike felt it was vital that those making decisions about the restoration see the ranch and its structures for themselves.

The result of that trip is that sometime in October, a draft proposal for Fish & Game regarding restoration of the Stonebraker barn will be issued offering three options: (1) leave it alone; (2) secure its foundation and prop it up; or (3) restore to original condition. Mike doesn't know when Fish & Game will make a determination, but once he has the official proposal in hand he intends to visit his contacts at Fish & Game again, as well as Goodson at the governor's office, giving him a copy of the proposal and asking to be kept advised on its status. As testament the Schaffers' resolve to put deeds behind words and demonstrate their commitment, they put together a brochure explaining the historic significance of Stonebraker, illustrated with current and historic photos and proposing that various citizen groups and nonprofits interested in backcountry preservation and access could come together to help fund and maintain a restored Stonebraker Ranch and airstrip.

A Brief History of Stonebraker Ranch

"When you fly over the harsh terrain of Idaho's Central Mountains, then come to Chamberlain Basin, you can see why it was the earliest settled ranch," Mike says. "The basin gentles out to a softer place from every direction. No wonder someone noticed, even from the ground." That early ranching history in such challenging, remote country is part of what sparks the Schaffers' interest in Stonebraker. "It has a fascinating history," Sue explains. "The early homesteaders eked out a living in the backcountry,

something we don't do nowadays. They grew hay, had mules, hunted and grew their food. We believe that because of the easy access to this area by air, if opened to the public visitors would get to see the old homesteading lifestyle, the artifacts left behind and the structures. Groups could visit for the history, wildlife viewing and educational purposes." Stonebraker Ranch currently has five cabins including the main one, a wood shed, an equipment shed, the deteriorating barn, an outhouse, corrals and a fence surrounding the entire ranch.

The area known as Stonebraker Ranch was first inhabited by George and Dixie Otterson in 1907. They filed a homestead application for 160 acres, but after some wrangling with bureaucrats over his claim, Otterson abandoned the site and moved his family north of the Salmon River.

In 1911, William Allen Stonebraker took notice of the unimproved Chamberlain Basin land and in 1912 filed a homestead application for 159.9 acres. By 1914, he and his family had built a two-story house, a barn and cellar; the next year they added a blacksmith shop, chicken coop, storage shed and corrals. In 1920, Stonebraker's homestead application was approved.

In the early 20s, Stonebraker partnered with Nick Mamer, an early aviator and pilot with the National Guard's 116th Observation Squadron in Spokane. Together, Mamer and Stonebraker created the first fly-in dude ranch in the area, building the first backcountry airstrip. (Mamer came to be known as the Grandfather of Backcountry Aviation.) By 1925, the partners were advertising backcountry big game hunting trips in the Lewiston and Grangeville newspapers, with Stonebraker acting as on-the-ground guide. The ranch was successful, but in 1932 Stonebraker died of a heart attack. It was the Depression, and his wife Golda was unable to pay the ranch taxes. Stonebraker Ranch was sold in 1937 for \$3,000.

After changing hands a few more times, Idaho Fish & Game purchased the ranch in 1947, along with an adjacent property, and leased the properties to backcountry outfitters. Improvements were made to structures on the properties under the lease, including a bathroom facility at Stonebraker. Some issues arose between the lessees and the Forest Service – non-fenced stock animals grazing on USFS land and in riparian zones—resulting in Fish & Game terminating of the lease agreement with outfitters. Disputes between Fish & Game and the Payette NF/USFS over Fish & Game's access to and use of wagon roads in the wilderness continued, however. Rather than seeking special-use permits, Fish & Game opted to make airstrip improvements at Stonebraker so they could bring supplies in by air, avoiding the need for USFS roads or permits.

Under Fish & Game ownership, the ranch has been used for meetings, some biology studies, and occasional summer housing for interns and employees.

A Special Connection to the Land and its History

Mike figures he's visited Stonebraker 12-14 times, Sue accompanying him on three or four of those visits and their Golden Retriever Reiley acting as co-pilot on two flights. Once, the Schaffers camped there to enjoy the full experience—day and night—of the pristine Idaho backcountry. "It's a place where people can be grounded," Mike says, "especially when you stay the night and put your back on the ground. I felt tremors there; the area has seismic movement daily. Unless your back's on the ground, you don't notice. I felt them while sleeping on my back, with Reiley by my side.

Mike doesn't just talk; he walks, acts, and volunteers. Keeping the public backcountry airstrips maintained is critical for safety, but the Forest Service often can't afford to do the work. User groups get

involved and volunteer, taking some of the burden from the Forest Service. For the past three years, Mike has helped the Forest Service maintain the Mahoney Creek, Bernard Creek and Indian Creek airstrips. He and other volunteers fly in with tools and work alongside Forest Service personnel, removing brush, smoothing airstrips, maintaining tie downs, runway markings, replacing or repairing windsocks, even doing rodent removal when necessary. “More inspiring that doing the work is learning the true story of the location by working beside a knowledgeable government employee,” says Mike. “It’s one of the biggest benefits of working together on maintenance.”

The Schaffers’ dream of restoring and preserving Stonebraker Ranch and opening it to the public was threatened this summer when wildfires burned nearby. Forest Service wildland firefighters wrapped the ranch structures at Stonebraker with fire-retardant materials, including the historic barn, despite it’s nearly-collapsed condition, which Mike takes as a sign that not just the Forest Service but other government entities will agree it’s worth preserving for future generations.

By invitation, Mike recently flew into Campbell’s Ferry, another private Idaho backcountry holding. Campbell’s Ferry has been through a similar preservation process with the state. Even though he was warned it can be a lengthy process, Mike’s enthusiasm for Stonebraker’s preservation was renewed after his visit.

Mike is persistent. His airline-pilot’s easy-going manner and quiet, calm approach charmingly mask a steely determination to preserve Stonebraker for all to enjoy. The Schaffers’ goal is to create enthusiasm for the project among many groups – pilots, backcountry horsemen, and those interested in historic preservation – collaborating with Fish & Game and other government entities to preserve the gem that is Stonebraker Ranch for all to see and enjoy.

To make it possible for people to detach themselves, at least temporarily, from the strain and turmoil of modern existence, and to revert to simple types of existence in places relatively unmodified can afford unique opportunities for physical, mental and spiritual recreation or regeneration.” Rutledge Parker, Dec. 1930